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Currents

Moscow Eyed in Pope's Shooting

ROME

Was Yuri Andropov behind the attempt to kill Pope John Paul II?

As farfetched as it may seem, a series of recent developments triggered wide speculation that the new Soviet leader—formerly chief of Russia's secret police—may have been involved in the May, 1981, attack.

Evidence was shadowy and the link to Andropov tenuous. But the respected British journal the *Economist* said enough had surfaced to make "the idea that the attempted murder of the Pope 19 months ago was authorized by the Soviet government at least a working hypothesis."

Officially, it was Bulgaria that was fingered in the shooting as a result of these developments—

- Sergei Ivanov Antonov, Rome manager of the Bulgarian state airline, was arrested on suspicion that he gave logistical help to the Pope's would-be killer, Mehmet Ali Agca, a Moslem fanatic from Turkey. Agca spent time in Bulgaria in 1980 and has implicated Bulgarians in the plot to kill the Pope.

- Italian police alleged that two employes of the Bulgarian Embassy in Rome were accomplices of Agca. Both had returned to Bulgaria, where they claimed their innocence in a December 17 news conference.

- Italian union leader Luigi Scricciolo admitted spying for Bulgaria. He reportedly named a Bulgarian as a participant in the plot to slay the Pope.

Intelligence experts made this point: If the Bulgarian secret police had a role in the shooting of the Pope, it would be difficult to imagine that they had acted without the knowledge of the Soviet KGB, then headed by Andropov.

Before the Pope was shot, there were signs that Russia would invade Poland to put down the Solidarity union movement. Moscow is said to have viewed the Polish Pope as the No. 1 rallying point for Polish nationalism.

Observers here stressed that there still was no proof that the Kremlin had authorized the attack on the Pope. Hard evidence on the case, they said, may surface when Italian courts try the Bulgarian airline official charged with complicity in the crime. □

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